

CHAPTER NINE

Heart of the Wolf: *Transcending Warriorhood*

— Odin —

The divinatory seance of Thorbiorg provides a close encounter with the work of a mystic from the world of our ancestors. And the clues in the magical medical documents, stories, sacred poetry and archaeological research which I have described in earlier chapters make it possible to begin to pull together the threads of wisdom of Wyrð, even on occasion weaving them into some sort of pattern which might begin to resemble the original, a thousand years ago and more.

But there is one particular body of material that I have not yet described in any detail. This is the sacred poetry collected together by Snorri Sturluson referring to the initiatory experiences of the god Odin. These accounts, written in the thirteenth century but from material of centuries earlier, afford a glimpse of the first-hand experiences of a mystic of Wyrð as he enters the 'sacred realms'.

When Wotan sings across the opera stages of the world, at the centre of the *Ring* cycle of Wagner, his stories are dramatised in the manner befitting grand opera. But the stories are more than the dramatic creations of Wagner. They go back a thousand years. They represent some of the key themes of ancient shamanic Europe. The stories, like so much else of the traditions of the forest peoples, lie just beneath the surface of modern-day culture, so that we are still breathing our ancestral knowledge, stirring archetypal patterns, when we think we are merely enjoying an evening's entertainment! Not only opera; I believe that many of our artistic and cultural activities, be they theatre, dance, film, fine art and so on, provide overlays upon overlays, mirrors, masks and disguises which enable us to stay in touch

with ancient themes of our sacred past amid the secular settings of modern-day society.¹

Wotan, as he was known in ancient Germanic cultures, was called Woden in Britain, and Odin in Scandinavia. Most of our knowledge about his original nature stems from this latter tradition, for these far reaches of north-west Europe were Christianised later than the mainland and Britain, in some cases not until the beginning of the second millennium; Iceland became officially Christian in the rather neat historical niche of 1000 AD. And so in Scandinavia the sacred stories of deities and spirits survived longer, and were admitted into post-Christian life more fully than before by missionaries keen to engage the last outposts of 'lost souls' into the messianic mélange of the organised Church.²

The thirteenth-century Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson, writing from oral tradition and written sources now lost to us, describes the Norse god Odin's appearance: he has only one eye, the other being sacrificed during his quest for visionary initiation. He travelled among people, and in human size and form, wearing a wide-brimmed hat to avoid recognition. He has a blue cloak, and carries a magic spear called Gungnir. A traveller carrying a spear would not have been unusual, though on Odin's shoulders ride two ravens, called Huginn and Muninn, which must have been rather more of a giveaway. The names mean, roughly, 'thought' and 'memory', and each day the sacred birds cover the world for him as visionary seers.³

Snorri Sturluson explains that Odin was originally a mortal being of great wisdom and knowledge.⁴ His exploits became legend, then myth, and finally he was recognised in the form of a god. As a deity he was acknowledged and celebrated widely across tribal Europe, from the northernmost reaches of Scandinavia to the eastern steppes of Germany, south into the Celtic lands of Breton and west to Ireland, where his identity was represented by the Celtic god Lugh.⁵

The god's very name ties him to the beginnings of the shamanic traditions of Europe. The etymology of the Germanic name Woden relates it to 'wut', meaning 'high excitement, fury, intoxication or possession', and the Old Norse adjective 'odr', from which Odinn, the late form of his name in Scandinavia, is derived, bears a similar

meaning of 'raging, furious, intoxicated'. These words, conjuring an image of extreme emotional arousal, mental and physical inspiration, a crucible for great 'possessing' forces, describe the state of mind, body and spirit of the shamanic trance.⁶ They are virtually identical to the etymological meaning of the term shaman, which derives from the word 'saman' of the Tungus people of Siberia, meaning 'one who is excited, moved, raised'. So in the ancient languages of north-west Europe, it seems likely to me that Odin/Wotan/Woden is a title meaning 'shaman', a professional designation, a name to be awarded and assumed upon completion of the initiatory process of inner discovery. Indeed those stories about Odin which have survived depict him as possessing a wide range of shamanic abilities, including healing, spellcasting, shapeshifting, and the knowledge of sacred signs and symbols. In addition, Snorri Sturluson says that: 'Odin . . . had the gift of prophecy, and by means of this magic art he discovered that his name would be famous in the northern part of the world, and honoured above that of all kings.'⁷ As we have seen, divination was regarded as the province of female magic. Odin's knowledge of divination was a gift from Freya, the goddess of seeresses, and he transcended the gender division of initiation to become the most gifted shaman of all. His acquisition of women's knowledge was highly controversial as I shall soon explain.

Although Odin/Woden/Wotan was conceived of as the 'original' shaman, this is highly unlikely in the linear dimension of historical time. Such archaeological clues as we have in, for example, the cave paintings of Lascaux, suggest that the practice and artistic depiction of shamanic activity would have long predated the person of Odin as he was imaged in the so-called Dark Ages.⁸ But the traditional cultures of Europe saw time not as a historical sweep of linearly ordered events connected inexorably by chains of influence, but rather in cycles and rhythms. And this concept of time lent itself to ritual in which the participants were able to 'stop' time and to create, by means of activities rich in symbolic significance, a timeless state in which the original event could be relived.⁹

These rituals celebrated Odin's identity as being the original shaman. When he took the shaman name of Odin, he would have inherited all

previous wisdom as if it were his own. The people of Wyrð were probably aware of ancient shamanic practice from stone monuments which had survived all over Europe from aeons ago, and they would have incorporated this awareness into their own sacred life.

In this sense Odin/Wotan/Woden is truly the 'First Shaman'. As Wotan sings Wagner's music on the opera stages of today, he is giving us only a glimpse of what he knows.

— The Lesson of Death and Rebirth —

I mind the folk war – the first in the world –
when they pierced Gullveig with their pointed spears,
and her they burnt in the High One's hall;
she was three times burnt and three times born,
over and over yet ever she lives.

Heidr men call me when their halls I visit,
a far-seeing witch, wise in talismans, caster of spells,
cunning in magic, to wicked women welcome always.¹⁰

It nearly did not happen. Any of it. For Odin had to learn a crucial, life-changing lesson from Freya, the goddess of magic, before he could take the first step of his initiation. The lesson was about death, rebirth, and the power of the feminine.

It is a remarkable story. The poetic lines above are from the *Elder Edda*. The narrative reveals how Odin was led into shamanic realms, indeed on his wisdom quest, by a woman, a seeress already versed in the powers of the spirit world. The incident which impels this to happen is embedded in poetic lines which contain the visions of a seeress presumably very like Thorbiorg. I have taken these visions to be those of a single seeress, and put them together in the account below, moving back and forth within this vivid material. In particular, I have included a section of the poem dealing with a seeress's vision of a war which ends the world within the seance conducted by Heidr and Gullveig, in the lines above. (Gullveig and Heidr, names which mean respectively 'Shining One' and 'Gold', are identical names for one and the same person.)

So the story opens when Odin, as a powerful warrior and chieftain, is leading a tribal community across western Europe and into Scandinavia, and 'taking possession of much of the land', in Snorri's account. They arrived in what is now Sweden, and their travels were 'attended by such prosperity that, wherever they stayed in a country, that region enjoyed good harvests and peace, and everyone believed that they caused this, since the native inhabitants had never seen any other people like them for good looks and intelligence'. Since Odin struck such a fine figure, I suspect that this is well before he lost an eye, bought the large-brimmed floppy hat for disguise in the 'lands of men', and had two ravens riding on his shoulders and leaving drop-pings on his cloak.

According to *Visions of the Seeress*, a woman called Heidr came to Odin's great hall, a woman who could see into the future, cast spells, manipulate magical objects and charms; an impressive volva rather like Thorbiorg. 'Outside I sat by myself . . .' she said,¹¹ 'by myself, when you came, terror of the gods, and gazed in my eyes. What do you ask of me? Why tempt me?'

'Terror of the gods' refers to Odin's power in the realm of the warrior gods: 'and gazed in my eyes' is interesting: perhaps he took a long, close look into Heidr's eyes to see if she really was a seeress.

She does not come readily: 'What do you ask of me? Why tempt me?' It seems that she wants Odin to say it, to ask for her wisdom, to name a price. He does so: 'Arm-rings and necklaces, Odin, you gave me to learn my lore, to learn my magic.'

Heidr, a far-seer, conjures a vision into the future, and offers Odin a prophecy, a glimpse of her occult knowledge: 'Odin, I know where your eye is concealed, hidden away in the well of Mimir: Mimir each morning his mead drinks from Allfather's pledge.' Allfather is one of the names applied to Odin, and she seems to be prophesying the initiatory encounter he will have with the wisdom giant Mimir, when he will be granted knowledge of spells of power in exchange for his sacrificing of an eye and embarking on a terrible beheading game.

'Well, would you know more?' Heidr is obviously telling Odin the sort of thing he wants to hear, and at this point Odin may have given

her more gold in exchange for another vision. She goes on: 'Of Heimdahl, too, and his horn I know, hidden under the holy tree? Down on it pours a precious stream from Allfather's Pledge.' Heimdahl was a god who accompanied Odin in his consultations with Mimir – he is even perhaps an aspect of Odin – and so she is relating further detail about Odin's initiatory encounters with Mimir. 'Well, would you know more?'

But then, abruptly, her narrative changes, and she seems to address the beings and spirits that are clamouring in her entranced mind:

Silence I ask of the sacred folk,
Silence of the kith and kin of Heimdahl.

With this exclamation she has banished from her mind the visions of Odin's initiatory future and starts to tell of something else.

At Odin's request she recounts ancient knowledge: 'At your will Allfather, I shall well relate the old songs of men I remember best.' Heidr tells, at length, of the beginning of time, how Earth and sky were created out of chaos, and how the first man and woman were created out of driftwood on the shore. She recounts how the gods established themselves in Asgard, and lived in contentment around the World Tree, naming created things, making tools and fine treasures, building halls, and sitting in counsel to establish the laws which governed the worlds.

This is not prophecy, because it is something which presumably has happened already (although with cyclical time one can never be sure), but it is occult knowledge, secret information about the beginnings of time. Either Odin already knows it and she is establishing her credentials by proving that she knows it too, or it is new information, and he is learning from her. I suspect that it is the latter, because it seems unlikely that Odin would be bribing her with arm rings to tell him things he already knows.

She then tells Odin what was his role at the beginning of time when he came to the Earth and found ash and elm trees which were feeble, faint and with no destiny, no breath, no blood or senses, no language or life colour. And it was he who was able to give them these things.

She then returns to prophetic visions: 'I know an ash-tree, named

Yggdrasil . . . ' and begins to describe the sacred tree on which Odin will undergo his initiatory tests, where it stands in the mythological universe, and then tells of the three Norns, the Wyrd Sisters, who determine the lives of men and fix for ever their fate.

This is where things take a dramatic turn for the worse. Presumably up to now it has all been acceptable to Odin. He keeps wanting to hear more. But suddenly, Heidr switches the attention to herself, and delivers shocking lines, predicting a war which will result from the attempts of Odin and his warriors, right there in the great hall, to pierce her with spears and attempt to burn her to death in the fire-pit. But that she will be reborn. We can imagine the stunned reaction.

The seeress plunges into visions which prophesy tragedy, bad fortune, and catastrophe. She tells about war breaking out between the different races of the gods: the Vanir, fertility gods (of which she is a representative) and the Aesir, warrior gods (Odin's tribe). She also predicts greed, oath-breaking and treachery: 'Oaths broken, binding vows, solemn agreements sworn . . . ' and delivers a crushing image of a war to end the world. Since this comes much later in the poem, it may be more a forewarning of the worst that could happen if the imminent war between the races of gods was not contained. It must have made for pretty apocalyptic reading: omens and portents preceded the end, Odin's son Balder will be slain, and the monsters which the gods had held secure (remember Fenrir the wolf?) will break loose to join the frost giants in an attack on Asgard. In the final battle both gods and monsters will perish, and raging fire and overwhelming seas engulf the Earth. She recounts her vision of the future: 'Earth sinks in the sea, the sun turns black, cast down from heaven are the hot stars, fumes reek, into flames burst, the sky itself is scorched with fire.' It is a deeply disturbing vision, even now. Far too like a nuclear holocaust for comfort.

Her prediction about the war between the races of gods was borne out. Other sources in the ancient sacred literature show that the mythological war did happen, despite initial attempts to negotiate a settlement. This means that Odin and his warriors did try to burn Heidr/Gullveig. The gods had lived in peace until Gullveig's visit to the stronghold of the Aesir. The myth explains that after the

Aesir tried to kill Gullveig, the Vanir met to decide whether they should demand a wergild, a fine in punishment for their hostile actions. But their deliberations were cut short when Odin hurled his spear into the kingdom of the Vanir in the well-known signal that war was to begin. In the myth it was described as the first war ever.

Christian writers blame this on Gullveig, and a later version of the story, written after the north had been firmly Christianised, reflects the Christian aversion to feminine magic. The 'heroic lay' of the verse Edda called *Volsungakvitha* dates from after the year AD 1000; that is, after the introduction of Christianity to Iceland:

Thou wast a Valkyrie thou loathsome witch
evil and base in Allfather's hall;
the Champions all were forced to fight
for thy sake thou subtle woman.¹²

But, eventually, in the myth the fertility and warrior gods called a truce. And at this cessation of battle, the gods held a peace conference and arranged an armistice this way: they each went up to a pot and spat their spittle into it. When they parted, the gods took that peace token and rather than let it perish they made of it a man. This man is called Kvasir, so wise that 'nobody would question him about anything at all without his knowing the answer'. So the outcome of the war between the masculine and the feminine principles was wisdom.

What does this incident mean? What can we make of it today? There is so much here it is difficult to know where to start. It has to be, I think, with the identity of the seeress.

— The Presence of Freya —

To begin to unlock some of the significance of this tale, we must stay with the myth a little longer, and begin by examining again the identity of the seeress.

Gullveig and Heidr, the two names of the seeress, both mean, essentially, 'gold' or 'bright as gold'. But in the myths generally it was Freya, the archetypal shamaness, revered as a deity, who was the

primary image of a 'golden goddess'. She wept golden tears, gleamed with golden decoration including the famous necklace of knowledge called Brinsangamen, and embodied gold as a symbol of wisdom. Not only that: Freya was also deemed to be in charge of the powers of divination, magic and witchcraft. She owned a falcon skin which enabled her spirit to take the form of a bird, travel to the Lowerworld, and come back with prophecies and knowledge of destinies. And so Gullveig and Heidr are identified by some scholars as being Freya in disguise.¹³

Why would Freya be in Odin's hall? Snorri Sturluson has the answer, for he tells us that it is Freya who teaches Odin the secrets of divination, the special kind of sorcery that was a woman's mystery.¹⁴ Her appearance at his hall as a diviner drew him into her power. I believe that, as Snorri says, for Freya to initiate Odin into the mysteries of the seeress's art (the most powerful magic there is, according to Snorri), she needed to get him to make a commitment to embarking on such a transition. He said that he wanted to learn some of her lore and some of her magic, and he paid Freya in gold arm rings for her divinatory seance. But there is, of course, much more to it than that.

At the outset of the encounter Odin acted as though he could 'buy' the seeress's knowledge with gifts of gold: 'Arm-rings and necklaces, Odin, you gave me to learn my lore, to learn my magic,' she says. In fact, Freya does not give much indication that she is keen to 'sell' her knowledge to Odin. At first, she wants to know why he is trying to tempt her with gifts, as if she doubts his motives. And she continually tests him during the seance by asking him to confirm whether he wants to 'know more', as if she is not sure that he is yet ready to hear more. But then, in the divinatory seance when she finally tells him what he does not want to hear, Freya knows that when Odin hears about the dark, shadow sides of his future life he will be so enraged by the bad news that he will try to rid himself of his doom-laden future by killing the messenger.

We also know from a couple of mythological sources that Odin did indeed start the war that the seeress predicted: in the *Vision of the Seeress*, right after the Gullveig story, come the lines:

Odin hurled his spear into the army of enemies:
so came for the first time war into the world,
the walls crumbled of castle Asgard;
the raging Vanir trampled the earth.¹⁵

The same incident is related in the *Ynglinga Saga*: 'Odin moved with his band of warriors against the Vanir (the race of fertility gods of which Freya was a member), but they knew the attack was coming and defended themselves, so that neither were able to overcome the others. Each devastated the lands of the others and caused much damage. When they had had enough of this warfare, they agreed on a peace treaty and exchanged hostages.'

So Odin initiated the attack, but his battle strategy failed. In the peace treaty in which they exchanged hostages, the fertility gods sent Njord (Freya's father) and his son Frey (probably originally Freya herself, before the cultural changes in gender of the gods, which I discussed earlier in the book). In exchange for Frey (Freya) and her father, the warrior gods sent Hoenir (often the trusted companion of Odin on his travels) and the wise giant Mimir (who was to be Odin's mentor in his shamanic initiation). This deal produced a fragile peace; broken once, almost right away, but then restored.

— Freya Comes Back to Life —

So why did Freya, in the guise of Heidr/Gullveig, visit the hall of Odin and prophesy his attempt to kill her and the subsequent war? Some writers on mythology have concentrated on the notion that she 'caused' the first war, and that that is the significant dimension of the story. But for me the overriding image which comes from the incident is not the predicted war, but Freya's coming back to life three times from death. This process of death and rebirth lies at the heart of shamanism and the sources of many of the great religions. I think that Freya wanted to demonstrate to Odin her shamanic powers of death and rebirth to draw him into his own process of development, of transcendence of his status as a warrior and on to a new identity as a shaman.¹⁶ In fact, in mythology, Odin eventually becomes the arche-

typal shaman on whom mortal shamans based their sacred visions and rituals. The dramatic encounter in his hall marks, I believe, the beginning of Odin's journey into deep inner knowledge.

Of course Freya, as Heidr/Gullveig, was conscious that she already possessed shamanic knowledge and abilities. The central lines of the whole poem depict her nature: 'A far-seeing witch, cunning in sorcery'. We have to recognise that these words from a pre-Christian era have acquired, over the centuries, a negative connotation. For many people 'witch', at least until the recent renaissance of women's spirituality, reeked of rituals evil and forbidden. Now it is more widely recognised as a term designating a practitioner of 'wicca', an aspect of the spirituality of ancient Europe.¹⁷

Similarly, 'cunning' is a quality which is nowadays regarded with suspicion. It is synonymous with 'sneaky, scheming', and certainly 'not to be trusted'. And the word 'sorcery' implies action of a malevolent quality and dark forces. But in the context of the ancient European shamanic tradition the words are actually descriptive rather than disapproving. Gullveig was a witch; that is, a practitioner of pre-Christian spiritual rituals. And 'cunning in sorcery' in the original meaning of the words means 'clever in divination',¹⁸ or in the manifesting in the material world events conjured from the spirit world. 'Far-seeing' simply indicates that she was a diviner, a person who could 'see' far into the future.

There is no question that Freya had shamanic powers if she survived being burned 'to death' three times, and as Eliade points out, all over the world shamans of more recently surviving tribal cultures are considered to be 'masters of fire'. During the festivities at the 'ordination' of an Araucanian shaman the masters and the initiates walk barefoot over fire, without burning themselves or setting fire to their clothes. Throughout northern Asia and North America the shamans are able to swallow burning coals or to touch red-or white-hot iron.¹⁹

'Spirits' are distinguished from mortal humans by their incom-bustibility, their capacity to endure the heat of live coals, so shamans who have mastered fire are believed to have passed beyond the bonds of normal human condition and to be able to enter the spirit world. The mastery of fire expresses in sensory terms a *transcendence of the*

human condition, and the ability to become a spirit. The apparent ability to survive the physical effect of flames is tantamount to transcending the sensorial realms altogether; it 'anticipates the experience of death . . . (the shaman) can exist, in his capacity as a "soul", without its separation from the body being fatal to him'.²⁰

Holger Kalweit points to the substantive significance of the belief that shamans transcend the limitations of the physical body: 'The belief, the knowledge, and even the experience that our physical world of the senses is a mere illusion, a world of shadows, and that the three-dimensional tool we call our body serves only as a container or dwelling place for something infinitely greater and more comprehensive than that body.' This is a central concept which characterises recently surviving indigenous cultures, as well as that of ancient Europe.

More generally, Freya's death and rebirth echo a process at the heart of all shamanic cultures. The shaman was believed to be able to journey to the land of the dead and back again. These journeys were perilous, but the shaman garnered information and knowledge from the Lowerworld, and was able to pass it on in rituals of healing, initiation or spiritual celebration. The initiation of a shaman invariably involves an intentional journey to the limits of physical endurance, a ritual in which the body, mind and soul of the apprentice are sacrificed to make way for a totally new identity, that of the shaman. The extreme physical challenges enable the apprentice to enter visionary mental and emotional states, and to make possible journeys into the spirit world.

In more recent times initiatory shamans are often depicted as having survived physically dangerous and life-threatening conditions. Some of the feats are humanly impossible, but are actually mimicked in ritual circumstances which may be arduous, but fall short of fatality. For example, an account of an initiation ritual from early in this century tells of the Caribou Eskimo shaman Igjugarjuk, who was initiating a pupil called Aggiartiq. In this case the form of dying was by drowning. 'Aggiartiq was tied fast to a long tent pole and carried down to a big lake. A hole was hewn through the ice and Aggiartiq was lowered, fully dressed, to the bottom of the lake and left there for

five whole days. When they pulled him up he was as dry as if he had never been touched by the water. After this, he obtained guardians, and became a shaman.' This process of death and rebirth by which traditional shamanism has marked the transition from mortal human to sacred shaman certainly underlines Freya's status as a shaman.²¹

So the story of Odin and Gullveig confirms that Freya, a goddess representing the powers of the feminine, knew the secrets of divination before Odin did. And she taught them to him. She also had magical abilities to withstand fire, and other hardships (including spears being thrust through her), and to die and be reborn. These capacities, characteristic of the shamans and mystics of many recently surviving indigenous peoples, demonstrate vividly that for our ancestors, the tribespeople of ancient Europe, the deep secrets of Wyrd magic were held in the depths of the feminine. Although feminine forces are part and parcel of both women and men's psyches, I think that it also probably means that the people of Wyrd believed that women were practitioners of central aspects of shamanism before men.

All this was something that Freya knew Odin needed to see. Freya was capable of divination, which Odin wished to know, and would pay arm rings in order to hear. But she was also capable of resisting attempts to kill her by spear and fire; she knew that this would terrify Odin, but intrigue him utterly once he had recovered from the shock. His initial reaction would cause ructions, but by the time he was involved in an 'exchange of hostages', Freya knew that Odin would be well on the way to exploring deeper layers of magic. He had had to acknowledge the special power of her sorcery, secrets that he would certainly want to 'know' for himself.

— Feminine and Masculine Polarities —

But, impressed though he must have been by Freya's show of magical prowess, Odin did not immediately find a way to integrate with it, to approach it, to be open to learning it. He struck out against it. Why was this?

One way for us to understand better the significance of this war is

to consider more closely the nature of the two 'races' of gods, the Vanir and the Aesir. The Vanir (of whom Freya is a leading goddess) are depicted by Snorri as being fertility deities. They are the older gods of earth and vegetation. They are peace-loving and have a great sense of art and beauty. Theirs is a world in which women play a prominent role. And they possess the most powerful magical techniques of all: the powers of divination. The Vanir represent the forces of the feminine principle.

The Aesir, on the other hand (of whom Odin is a leading god), are warriors. They are the younger, less mature gods of war. They are patriarchal gods of conquest. They command a different magic: that of words and spellcasting. They all categorically reject the magical knowledge of the Vanir as being 'shameful for men' — that is, with the exception of Odin who, as we see, learns this magical art from Freya.²²

Further, the myths and cosmology represent Frey and Odin as having a close relationship, even though they are from different races of deity. And yet we have just seen a story in which Odin tries to burn Freya to death.

I believe that the dispute between Odin and Freya is that between 'masculine' and 'feminine' principles. This of course is not a gender distinction, but a delineation of 'forces', 'energies', 'tendencies' within each of us. The cosmology of the ancient Europeans emphasised polarities of forces, as in the creation of the world through opposites akin to fire and ice. Earlier, when we considered the attempts of the gods and the dwarfs to tie down Fenrir the wolf, I discussed the intuitive capacities of our feminine principle as one way of approaching the world, and the masculine propensity for analytical processes as another way.

But this time it is emotional, deeper streams than the problem-solving of the Fenrir story. And it is a battle within the psyche of Odin. The warrior god, representing the masculine principle, wants more intimate knowledge of feminine magic, represented by Freya the fertility god, embodying the feminine principle. He offers to pay for it in gold. She shows him something of what she knows, but then 'reads' in her vision disastrous aspects of the dark side of Odin's future life. She knows that he will not, at his level of personal development

as the masculine principle, be able to deal with such a threat as her powers. She also knows what he will be driven to do about it: he is going to try to 'kill' his feminine aspects. These are the very aspects of his psyche which he needs to know if he is to become a shaman, like Freya. Part of him knows that, which is why he is seeking feminine divination in the first place. But he is not mature enough to follow it through, and 'war breaks out'.

In one sense, this war is a mythological one between tribes of deities. In another sense, it is warfare within the psyche of Odin, a battle between the warrior state of his masculine forces, and the hidden, repressed but beckoning potential of his feminine aspects.

The masculine and feminine polarities in nature, in people, and as expressed in the cosmology of our ancestors are not necessarily gender-based. As men and women we may all find ourselves going through a psychological and spiritual process of coping with, negotiating, attempting to mature through the constraints and dynamics of these forces. But Odin was trying to take a big step from warriorhood to mystic, and his struggle is probably a process which characterises some of the issues faced by men, both in his time and in ours.

— Warriorhood —

Odin's reaction to the prophesying of Gullveig was brutal. Not the sort of reaction one would like to see in an idealised 'apprentice mystic'. But the story is there. We need to try to make sense of it, and see what we can learn from it.

It could be said that he was acting as a warrior in the Viking tradition, and was therefore a 'product of his time'. Perhaps, in other words, his brutal clinging to his warriorhood was something which happened then, but not now. But it has been suggested recently by psychologists that the role of warrior functions as an archetype which is expressed mainly in men, although can of course also feature in women's psychology. If it is indeed an archetype, a deep-seated and ever-present way of dealing with the world, it is not restricted to any historically specific culture: it roams the psyche just as readily today as a thousand years ago.²³

There is not much doubt that at the time of Freya's visit to his hall (in the guise of Heidr/Gullveig) Odin was embodying the warrior archetype in its pure form. This is his role, of course, as a mythological figure; if humans find themselves embodying any of these great polarities in anything approaching pure form then we are in deep trouble psychologically, for they are meant to be balanced, flexible, interpenetrating, organically evolving, moving forward, returning. But Odin as a god embodied extreme states of the great polarities.

Today we are concerned about the apparent expression of pure warrior in the world, in wars and in macho self-presentation; aggressive energy in all its forms is regarded with suspicion and apprehension. Women in particular are disturbed by it, and this is hardly surprising since they are often the victim of it, either psychologically or physically.

Jungian writers Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette take the view that 'We can't just take a vote and vote the Warrior out. Like all archetypes, it lives on in spite of our conscious attitudes towards it. And like all *repressed* archetypes, it goes underground, eventually to resurface in the form of emotional and physical violence.'²⁴ But they go on to say that a mature, balanced person does not live the fully formed, extreme polarity of warrior to the exclusion of other major archetypes without suffering badly psychologically.

And there are advantages to a mature warrior archetype, when not lived exclusively and therefore fanatically: 'The Warrior should not be identified with human rage in any simple way . . . Aggressiveness is a stance towards life that rouses, energises, and motivates. It pushes us to take the offensive and to move out of a defensive or "holding" position about life's tasks and problems.'²⁵

Odin is at a stage where he has achieved fame and fortune as a warrior. He needs to move on to another stage in his evolution. But such a step, a step into inner knowledge, magical awareness, shamanic wisdom, is threatening, because he has to reach new parts of his inner self. This threatening situation, exacerbated by Freya's devastating show of magical power, tends to bring to the fore the unhealthy aspects of his warrior archetype, the 'shadow' side.

There is a deep-seated apprehension in the male warrior archetype

in its pure form, if unleavened by expressions of other crucial archetypal forces, a clinging to control with a desperation born of fear. It is sometimes manifested as an obsessive compulsion to attempt to suppress anything that is not within the warrior's realm of understanding, and thus offers a threat: 'The Shadow Warrior carries into adulthood the adolescent insecurity, violent emotionalism, and the desperation of the Hero as he seeks to make a stand against the overwhelming power of the feminine.'²⁶

Moore and Gillette propose that the man unable to live the warrior archetype in a balanced way finds himself still battling against what he experiences as the inordinately powerful feminine and against everything supposedly 'soft' and relational. Even in adulthood, he still feels terrified that he will be swallowed up by it. His desperate fear of this leads him to wanton brutality. This sounds very like Odin.

One aspect of such men's fear of the feminine is, as Archetypal psychologist Alan Bleakley points out, a sense of inferiority, of lack, in comparison with what is perceived as the woman's 'greater binding to Earth, and under-earth'. It is partly the Middle-World rational ego, which fears the irrational, dark Underworld, and therefore fears that without exerting control there might be a dreaded 'reversal to dark, chaotic, uncontained nature, to a permanent dream-time'.²⁷

But this clinging to the securities of the extreme warrior archetype plays against Odin being able to open himself up to the sacred power of Freya's knowledge; instead he is terrified by it and reacts violently. It is clear that Freya understands all this. She knows the warrior archetype, and predicts how Odin will react to her, and the outcome.

—Transcending the Feminine and Masculine—

But she also knows that Odin is ready to take this step into the feminine aspect of himself. How does one know when it is time? Alan Bleakley says that in understanding the integration of the feminine with the masculine we must beware of thinking that what we want is for 'men to be like women. The fatal mistake of the androgynists is their rejection of what is positive in the archetype of gender.'²⁸ A too-early integration of the feminine is dangerous.

As Archetypal psychologist James Hillman suggests (dipping into Greek mythology to illustrate his point): 'In serving the feminine, in letting the feminine rule, there is one essential caution. Hercules serves Omphale only after the twelve labours are done, and Ulysses abides with Circe only after the ten years in battle are passed. A certain masculine position must evidently have already been won.' He proposes that this might mean that first there must be an ego that has accomplished something. And if so, it implies that one is best to be past mid-life, otherwise one has too little awareness, too little strength, and the ego abandons its position too easily: 'Then it is no sacrifice, no real reorientation. Then it is merely a regressive serving of the Mother, separation from whom was the aim of all the labours and the battles.'²⁹

We know that Odin was a successful warrior first . . . and Freya's judgement was that he would integrate with the feminine only after lashing out, defending his position, protesting, resisting. She knew she had the power to withstand his mistakes.

She describes war. But she also describes the hostage-sharing between masculine and feminine forces (not strictly gender, as we see, since men and women are exchanged across the boundaries of the archetypes). I find it fascinating that in the hostage exchange, Odin allows Freya, and her father, into his territory, his main area of the psyche, as symbols of the feminine he is integrating with, and he yields up to the feminine (the Vanir) principle the being who is to be his mentor in shamanic initiation, the giant Mimir, and his companion in travel, Hoenir.

This is like an interchange of energies within the person: a sacrificing of the protective, exclusive boundaries of the warrior element of the masculine polarity in order that an integration might take place, a rebalancing, an opening to new potentials. Perhaps the story of Odin and Heidr/Gullveig/Freya is one which speaks to all of us.

—The Heart of the Wolf—

I want to bring us back briefly to the encounter between Odin and Freya (Gullveig) because, intriguingly, the sacred texts provide an

alternative ending to the incident. It closes the action at the point of the seeress being burned by Odin and the warriors for the third time. In a tiny piece of poetry from the *Short Voluspa* is the following:

Loki got the wolf with Angrbotha . . .

Loki ate the heart which lay in the coals, half-
burnt he found the heart of the woman;
Loptr was fertilised by the evil woman:
thence in the world came all the wolves.³⁰

It is likely that these lines refer to the episode between Odin and Gullveig, either literally, or so closely in mythological terms that they may be taken as the same story. It appears that the 'evil woman' (another charming epithet for a witch), now called Angrbotha, had been burned by persons unnamed, but her heart remained undestroyed. Loki represents the trickster aspect of the gods and sometimes accompanies Odin in his wisdom stories; if we regard Loki as representing here the trickster aspect of Odin, the part of him that 'turns upside down his normal world', we see that Odin's trickster self ate the burned heart of the woman from the embers.

Immediately the seeress with was him. He knew, without her having to tell him, that he had made his commitment. He was to leave the hall of the warriors, and go with her into a new realm, to learn the mysteries of divination and the wisdom of the Wyrð.

Alan Bleakley reminds us that when C.G. Jung, the psychiatrist and mythologist, visited the Pueblo Indians, he wrote of 'discovering new approaches to age-old knowledge that has been almost forgotten'. In his conversations with Ochwiay Biano (Mountain Lake), he encountered the 'Red Man' who spoke from the heart, who spoke with what Amerindians call 'Perfect Speaking'.

'See how cruel the whites look,' said Ochwiay Biano. 'They are always seeking something . . . We think that they are mad.'

Jung asked him why he thought the whites were all mad.

'They think with their heads,' he replied.

'Why, of course. What do you think with?' Jung asked him in surprise.

'We think here,' he said, indicating his heart.³¹

Such 'thinking' is alien to a culture that represses the heart. Like our culture today, in which the discipline of our minds has created the scientific and technical capacity to feed the world. And yet we do not do it. If we could also think with our hearts, perhaps we would do it.

In eating the half-burned heart of the seeress, Odin/Loki is learning to think with his heart. And in eating the heart he became 'fertile', or productive, and from that came 'all the wolves'. It is interesting that in the ancient mythology Odin is depicted as having for constant companions two wolves. They were important beings, guardian spirit animals called Geri and Freki. Odin was believed to give them all his food, needing only wine for himself. He sometimes adopted wolf form and wolf characteristics. So the reference to 'all the wolves' might refer to Odin's guardian spirits; in other words, not only the physical animals, but also the spirit animals of shamans.

— The Nature of Wolves —

It is appropriate that Freya 'gave with her heart' the spirit of wolves to Odin, two wolves as guardians, for she was to teach him divination, or 'far-seeing'. Today we tend to think of wolves as fearsome animals, rather like large guard dogs. But wild wolves are very different. They are beautiful, sensitive, perfectly of this world but also otherworldly.³²

I remember vividly the first time I encountered timber wolves. There were two of them, owned by the animal behaviourist John Fentress, and they lived in a wood, a large fenced compound, in Oregon. One day I went with him to visit them. As we walked along the narrow track into the wood, we rounded a bend and there, standing stock still under the trees and watching us closely, ears erect, were the wolves. They started moving about as we got nearer, and their wonderful camouflage coats made them appear like skittish ghosts, spirit visitors from another realm.

And then I heard a sound I shall never forget. Not a howl, nor a growl. Rather, a soft whistling; the repeated 'wshee, whee, wshee . . .' that people use when they are whistling their dogs to come to them. I glanced at John, but he was watching the wolves intently as we approached, and his mouth was closed.

'What was that whistling?' I asked.

'The wolves!' he replied with a grin. 'Remarkable, isn't it?'

And then I heard it again. It was a greeting cry from the wolves, one that must have been picked up by humans hundreds, or more likely thousands, of years ago. We learned their language, or a tiny snippet of it, in times long past.

We can gain a glimpse of how wolves might have been regarded by our ancestors from the views of more recently surviving tribal peoples. In North America, the Pawnee saw the wolf 'as an animal who moved like liquid across the plains; silent, without effort, but with purpose . . . he could see "two looks away" . . . he could even hear the clouds pass overhead.'³³

Perhaps this is how Odin travelled to distant places in spirit, to 'see far'. In fact, the wolf often appears in the legends of the Native American as the great long-distance traveller, a messenger or guide to the spirit world. Blind Bull, a famous Cheyenne shaman, was reputed to send and receive messages to various places in the real and spirit world via wolves. And a Cherokee embarking on a long winter's journey would first, as psychological and spiritual preparation, call on the help of the wolf spirit by rubbing his feet with ashes to grey them, singing a wolf song, and moving a few steps in imitation of the wolf.

There is another quality to the wolf which became appropriate for Odin: the wolf is often considered to be an 'outsider'. As in Hermann Hesse's famous novel *Steppenwolf*, about a man who lives on the fringe of society but reaches great insight into it, so the stepping from the world of the warrior into the realms of the shaman meant for Odin leaving behind some of the security of being 'one of the men'.³⁴ To obtain his knowledge from Freya he took an extra step, he ate her heart, he fought an internal war and negotiated a peace with a hostages exchange between his masculine and feminine polarities.

Sometimes to go deeper, to know more, to grow, one has to leave behind the security of the familiar. And it can happen that one is berated for it by others who cling to that security, who will not or cannot take the steps to learn from their other aspects. It happened to Odin when he learned from Freya the arts of divination and magic.

— Odin Becomes an Outsider —

Odin's reward for integrating his feminine is to learn the hidden secrets of Freya's 'feminine magic', the system of divination as practised by Thorbiorg, Heidr, Gullveig and Freya herself. He has to buck the expectations of masculine culture in order to do this. It was a step too far for most men; they could not manage it.

Snorri Sturluson says: 'Odin knew and used that craft, from which the greatest magical power followed, and which was called seidr. By this he could know men's fate and things to be.' He also says that seidr (the oracular ceremonies of Thorbiorg and Freya) gave the power over other people 'to bring about their death, misfortune or disease, deprive them of sense or strength and give it to others'.³⁵ This sort of power, if Freya/Gullveig held it and the warriors did not, would be great cause for fear, and would explain why they tried to kill her.

But the fear ran deeper than that, for Snorri Sturluson makes it clear that the knowledge was really the province of women, and was not considered suitable for men. Odin had therefore taken a grave risk. Snorri Sturluson again: 'But when this sorcery is exercised there follows from it such turpitude that men seemed not to be able to use it without shame.' As a result, says Snorri, Freya taught seidr to women priestesses only.

The seeresses who practised seidr were treated with great respect, but men who tried to learn or practise it were castigated. There are stories of men who dabbled in the divinatory magic of seidr, but they seem to have been looked down upon, disapproved of, and sometimes became outcasts. North-west European kings sometimes had them put to death, or banished from the country.

One of the early chieftains, Harald Fairhair, had a son called Ragnvald, who was said to have worked seidr with a company of eighty followers; some of them perhaps chanters. His descendant Eyvind also practised seidr, but there was great hostility against these two men, and both were killed in the end by members of their own family, and are condemned in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* for their wickedness.³⁶

Seidr was the province of the goddess Freya. As the centuries

unfolded and the Viking culture became more militarised and male-dominated, the god Freyr was introduced to represent a masculine aspect of Freya. But this caused confusion in the practice of seidr. Saxo Grammaticus, who wrote a history of Denmark in the late twelfth century,³⁷ refers to the worship of Freyr accompanied by 'effeminate gestures' and 'clapping of mimes upon the stage', together with the 'unmanly clatter of bells'. This implies some kind of performance which was part of the seidr rituals of Freya, but when they were incorporated into the new cult of Freyr, to Saxo and the Danish heroes whom he describes appeared unmanly and debased. In order to celebrate the powers of Freyr/Freya, men had to behave effeminately. Or, perhaps, acknowledge and express their own feminine aspects?

In the *Elder Edda* even Odin is reviled in the following words:

But they said that thou madest *seidr*
on Samsey island
and drummedst on the cove (or drum) as sorceresses;
like a sorcerer
didst thou run over the world
and I thought that unmanly.³⁸

The indigenous peoples of ancient Europe believed that there are secret wisdoms that only men can know. And secrets and wisdoms that reveal themselves only to women. But also, on the path to initiation, there are paths which transcend this divide, where men are led by women and women by men. Odin transcended the divide, and was initiated into some of the secrets of the opposite gender.

Freya was considered in the cosmology of ancient Europe to have a special relationship with the god Odin. For one thing, the ancient texts tell us that she was married to a god called Odhr. A number of scholars propose that Odhr is Odhinn (Odin). The name Odhr indicates the force of ecstasy, of the magically inspired mind, and writer on Norse mythology Edred Thorssen suggests that it is to this ecstatically seeking, spiritually inspired aspect of Odhinn to which Freya is married.³⁹ This shamanic inspiration is, as with Odhinn, the main object of her own strivings.

In the myths, Odhr is said to take many journeys, and Freya weeps golden tears for him, and even wanders in search of him. But given

that Odin is seeking powers which Freya already has, it suggests that she is weeping for him because he cannot find his initiatory path. And she is weeping gold. Not merely material gold, either, for she is the goddess of feminine shamanism. She weeps tears of golden alchemical inspiration. Odin is the one who is lost. And when Freya teaches him seidr, Odin finds himself through his feminine aspect. So Freya and Odin may have been lovers, or even married, but their love was probably sacred, tantric, and their marriage alchemical, magical. But one thing is clear: she was a mentor for some of his journeys into the wisdom of Wyrd.

A price Odin paid for his transcendent insight was rejection by those men who could not take the step with him into deeper knowledge. But his reward was elevation as the greatest god. Perhaps somewhere between those two extremes lies the destiny of all of us who attempt to gain a foothold on a deeper knowledge, including the wisdom of Wyrd.